

P. Williams, Francis

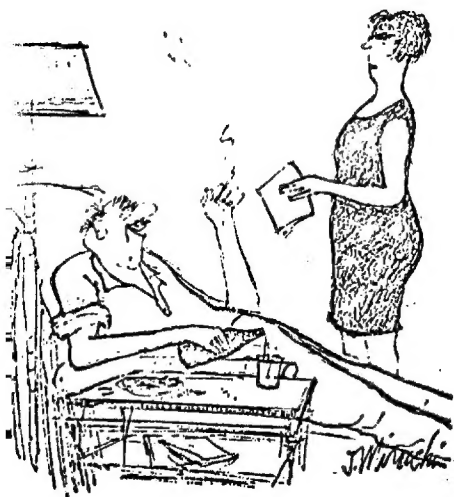
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ineptitude. "Unfortunately," the archaeologists of 2100 AD will be writing, "Sir Mortimer Wheeler in his head-strong way . . . Red herrings strewn in the path of exact interpretation by the blundering Italian Moretti . . . The rape of Ur, less than two hundred years ago, by the well-meaning Leonard Woolley . . ." This self-evident truth is ignored by the professionals of our time. Did Carl W. Blegen, when he came upon the site of Nestor's Palace at Pylos, say to himself "No, no. I must not touch! Advanced as are my techniques compared with those of poor old Schliemann, they cannot but be hopelessly amateurish and inept when set against those that will be available to the archaeologist of 2100"? Did he put up a notice "Not to be opened for one hundred and fifty years" and go right away? He did not. He drove in his spade. With infinite delicacy, tact and forethought, yes; still, he drove it in. There rings in my ears, across the generations yet to come, the incredulous cry "In those days, of course, they worked with spades!"

Not that I blame Carl W. Blegen or anyone else for getting on with it. Somebody has to make a start some time. Only, if it should cross my mind to put my goggles on and go for a swim round the ruins of HMS *Association*, let me have no hoity-toity bubbles blown at me by those bungling frogmen from Naval Air Command.



How remarkable, my dear. Slowly it unmistakably, you are turning into Sophia Loren."



## FLEET STREET

by Francis Williams

IT USED to be the case that if it was thrills you were after you had to go to newspapers of big circulation. Their crime reporters, armed with large expense accounts, a nodding acquaintance with a few middlemen of crime and an infinite capacity for standing rounds of drinks, could be expected to come up with the fascinating details.

Those days are over. They have been swept aside by the tides of social change. Crime and conspiracy have gone posh. If you want the real low-down today it is to the quality papers you must turn. The reporter with contacts and a pint of beer in his hand has been replaced by a combined operations which link agents in a dozen world capitals with a central task force under the command of a news executive with all the intellectual arrogance and tactical talent of General Dayan. Crime has become respectable and paying.

Consider, for example, the case of the Tshombe Kidnapping. In the olden days one would have turned to the popular papers for the detective work, to the qualities for discussions about the political implications and thunders against the Government for its craven inability to secure the immediate release of all Britishers involved. On this occasion, however, the roles have been almost exactly reversed. The thunder has come from the popular side of the street, with the *Daily Sketch* leading the roars; the fictionalised drama from the papers catering for readers with bowler hats and rolled umbrellas. "Tshombe's Kidnapping: The News Team Investigates The Facts Behind The Mystery. Mystery Man In Tshombe Kidnapping," said *The Times* in a story across six columns all over its centre page with photographs of the main characters and a torn piece of a telex message "confirming the charter of the aircraft." The opening of the story hit exactly the correct paper-back thriller note. "A mysterious company in Liechtenstein, a Parisian underworld figure, visits by a Congolese emissary to Geneva and Algiers . . ." So too did the second paragraph: "It is now clear that when Mr. Tshombe took off from Ibiza he flew into a trap that had been set with a careful audacity that is hardly in character with the heady impetuosity of African politics."

What *The Times* had begun, the "heavy" Sundays followed up. Although the mass circulation Sundays could not have cared less about it all. The *News of the World*, the *People*, the *Sunday Mirror* and the *Sunday Express* (except for a short news story on the British pilots)

were all equally uninterested. There was not a single thrilling instalment in any of them. It was the quality press that showed just how closely it is now necessary for news to follow fiction if you want to get the right kind of readers. All adopted the tough, cinematic, documentary style, heavily loaded with not always obviously relevant detail and a plentiful helping of violence that now appears to be mandatory in dishing up such matters for the tables of the comfortably off. It was, the *Observer* breathlessly explained under the gripping headline "Sabotage, Mutiny—And A Double Agent," "a multi-layered international mystery . . . There are three distinct but related episodes, each dense with its own complex and conflicting motives: how, where and to what extent they are connected is the heart of the mystery." From then on it plunged happily into the task of weaving together in the best spy story traditions "the blowing up of a railway bridge at Lubudi near the Angolan frontier," mutiny in the Congolese army at Bukava, the hi-jacking of Tshombe's plane, a secret visit to Algiers by the then Congolese Ambassador in Brussels and "the Congo's sudden switch last week to support the pro-Arab resolution in the UN Assembly." This exercise fortunately provided adequate scope for bringing in those deadpan descriptions of violence and torture that give such flavour to the after lunch coffee and cigarette: "Vandersteen, who denies being involved in the sabotage, was beaten in the stomach with hot torches and had four fingers and an ear cut off. He was then thrown naked into a railway truck and sent to Lubumbashi." The *Observer* story also had the intriguing suggestion admirably designed to please its readers that the Tshombe kidnapping was the work of the CIA—thus stimulating both their taste for spy thrillers and their moral anti-Americanism.

"Insight" in the *Sunday Times* (headline "Tshombe: The Big Double-Cross"), had a photograph for some reason of Tshombe shaving himself and of two other characters in the story, Bob Denard "veteran mercenary," "the charismatic Basque," and Francis Bodenan "not suspect." It also had a large chart with explanatory text. "The accumulating evidence suggests," it reported in just the right style of thrillerese, "that when the aircraft carrying the former Congolese Premier was hi-jacked nine days ago, it was the culmination of an elaborately prepared double-cross." According to Close-Up in the *Sunday Telegraph* (it scooped the others with a photograph of the visiting card of SEDEFI, the company registered in Liechtenstein which was involved in hiring the hi-jacked plane) "the plot . . . was a well endowed enterprise, perfectly and finely calculated which nevertheless was scarred with muddle, confusion and haste in its execution." It summed up: "More deafening than the shots (in the